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The Messianic Personality.

During the ~~past couple of thousand years~~ ^{middle ages}

Jews ~~have~~ ^{were} constantly ~~been~~ reminded by their non-Jewish neighbors that they were in exile, that their homeland was destroyed and that they were wanderers, strangers in other peoples' lands from which they might be expelled at ~~any~~ ^{any} time. Both Jews and non-Jews saw the ~~probable~~ origins ~~of~~ this situation in the sins of the Jewish people. The difference, ^{in point of view} of course, ~~was~~ was considerable. When the Jew recited in his holiday prayer *Yisroel U'Ed U'k'bn Yon* — he was certainly not referring to the killing of Jesus of Nazareth, for which Christians believed the Jewish people was to be punished.

In one other basic point Jew and Christian clashed. The Christian and Muslim, looking at the former glorious state of the

Jewish people and its present subservient position were able, in ~~these~~^{the} frequent polemical encounters with Jews, to use ~~the~~ a very potent weapon - the weapon of history. He could say to his Jewish opponent: If my interpretation of the Bible does not convince you that my religion is right, then you must trust the verdict of history. History, for both Jew and Christian, was, after all considered to be divinely guided. History, for the Christian, told the story of the success and proliferation of Christianity and of the degradation of the Jew. Small wonder, then, that in history the Christian felt he had an argument that would convince his stubborn opponent.

The Jew, ~~for~~ for his part, had several responses ready. He could and did reply, for instance, that the Muslims occupy

much more territory than the Christians? ^{and have achieved success against them.} But his most potent weapon in the preservation of Jewish faith throughout the ages is the notion that the outer verdict of history is not, in fact, the final word. That history was ^{ultimately toward} leading ~~toward~~ the re-establishment of the Jewish people - in short to the messianic era.

The hope in the coming of the messiah ~~is a doctrine which~~ has been one of the primary tenets of Judaism since Biblical times. But it was a doctrine which different groups within Judaism viewed with different perspectives. There were two basic divisions in messianic belief in the Jewish middle ages.

The first great division within Jewish messianic thought in the middle ages concerned speculation as to the nature of

The messianic age. From the Biblical and Rabbinic ^{passages} ~~scriptural~~ which formed the basis of all Jewish messianic speculation, two basic scenarios emerged. Rationalists, like Maimonides, saw basically a continuation of the normal order of the world and the laws of nature with the exception that the Jewish people would be free of foreign domination. Others, however, chose to take the Bible and the midrash much more literally and see the messianic age as radically different from this one. A revolution was to take place in nature so that, in Isaiah's phrase, the wolf would indeed lie down with the lamb and to literally interpret a midrash, that in messianic times the Land of Israel will possess a plant which bears as its fruit freshly baked rolls.

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and still another which brings forth garments of silk - better than off the rack.

The second basic division regarding the coming of the messiah is what to do about it. Certainly Jews prayed every day for messiah but was anything else to be done? Some Jews thought not. They felt that messiah would come in God's good time and, until that time there was nothing the individual Jew could do besides trying to observe the commandments of the Torah as well as he could. ^{One should not even calculate time} There were others, though, who felt differently. These people maintained that the messianic process could at least be initiated, if not culminated by human agency. It is these people, men who proclaimed themselves prophets, or forerunners of the messiah; ^{or even messiahs in their own eyes} gathered a following, and attempted to effect changes

in society in preparation for the messianic coming, who will be the subjects of the two lectures here. We will examine two ^{Jewish} messianic movements - one in the 7th century and one in the 16th and try to understand what was ^{the} driving force behind these movements - the messianic personality.

In understanding these messianic movements, the first thing you must realize is that they were always opposition movements, consistently opposed by the established Jewish communal leadership. The Jewish community maintained that the Jews, dependent as they were on the protection of the state and vulnerable to its power, could not afford to attempt any change in its status other than the tried and true methods of intercession and bribery. They felt that any deviation from passive expectation of the messiah was both futile and dangerous, plus being a threat to their position.

The other thing you have to bear in mind is that the Jews always had an eye on current events and the messianic implications of those events. When there was a major war going on - the image of Ezekiel's Gog and Magog flashed before their eyes. When an empire fell and another one rose, once again people thought of the messiah's footsteps. In every generation, in fact, it was possible to feel that this was it - disaster.

This phenomenon occurred especially during the rise of Islam in the seventh century. ^{In} ~~After~~ the ~~10~~ century after the death of Muhammed, Islam had spread from the Arabian peninsula and conquered the middle East, North Africa, Spain, and Central Asia, including the home of Mordecai and Esther, Iran. where we will now focus our attention.

Iran was different. While Arabic became the common language of the Muslim Empire, which was ruled from Damascus and

later from Baghdad, the Persians kept their own language. They also declared their independence by adhering to a different type of Islam - Shiite - than the rest of the Muslim world. Finally, the Iranians retained a feature ~~of~~^{ing} their religion which was not originally present in Islam but which spread from Persia - the idea of a messiah - called the Mahdi - "the expected one" who would fill the world with justice as it is now filled with injustice. This Mahdi, also known as the "Hidden Imam" was thought to be in hiding and would reveal himself in his own good time.

At ^{just} this time ^{when all this was transpiring}, in Iran, there was a Jew from the city of Isfahan who is known as Abu-Issa. We know very little about him and what we do know is not directly from him

but rather from second-hand source which were not overly sympathetic to him. This is what a Karate - Jacob at Kerkisani, has to say about him.

His name was Ovadin and he was called Abu Issa of Isfahan. He proclaimed himself a prophet and he appeared in the reign of Abd al Malik b. Marwan (685-705). It is said of him that he desired to rebel against the government, gathered an army and was killed in battle. However, there are those among his followers who claim that he didn't die but rather entered into a cave in the mountain ~~to~~ where he remains to this day. How did he convince his followers to believe in his message? He gave them a miracle - a sign that he was in possession of a divine revelation. According to the

report Kurbisani had heard, Abu-Issa was an illiterate tailor ~~that was~~ and yet he wrote numerous books, none of which have come down to us, unfortunately - it would be extremely helpful to see them. This miracle, of course, an illiterate writing a book under divine guidance is the same miracle claimed by Islam for ~~the~~^{its} Prophet, Muhammed and his work, The Qur'an. Kurbisani related that Abu-Issa extolled the rabbi greatly which further prejudiced Kurbisani against him since he was a Karaites an opponent of Rabbanite Judaism. But, perhaps the most ~~interesting~~^{intriguing} thing that Kurbisani had to say about Abu Issa was that in Damascus ~~he had~~^{he had} three centuries after the movement of Abu-Issa, there were a group of his ~~followers~~^{followers}

who were known as Isumians, Any movement which can last for Three centuries is assuredly no flash-in-the-pan.

We possess other accounts of Abu Issa and his movements ^{one of the most interesting series} from a Muslim writer Al-Shaharastani. Al-Shaharastani heard that Abu Issa ~~had~~ was called Isaac son of Jacob, ~~or Israhel~~ and flourished in the reign of the Khalifah al-Mansur (754-775). In this tale as well, Abu-Issa gathered a great army. He is supposed to have incanted a magic circle around his followers in order to protect them from his enemies. The enemy because they feared his magic, did not dare to penetrate that protective circle. At that point, Abu Issa alone rode out of the circle of his followers, sword in hand and

succeeded in killing many muslim soldiers. before dying in battle. Once again, though, his followers claimed that he did not die, but rather journeyed ~~to the~~ across the desert to visit the sons of Israel and preach to them.

Shaharastani related that Abu Issa proclaimed himself a prophet and the messenger of the messiah. — Note that he claims not to be the messiah himself but rather the prophet of messiah. He claimed further that the messiah has five messengers who appear one after the other but that he ~~is the~~ being the last of these messengers is the greatest of them — hinting more than broadly that the ^{last} messenger is in fact the messiah.

This idea that there are several

messengers of God appearing in succession is familiar from Moslem Theology. That is God was first revealed to Moses, then to Jesus and finally to Muhammed.

At this point his name, Abu Issa has to be analyzed, for it has a special significance in this context.

Arabic is, as you know, a very flowery language, and they never say anything directly when they can say it another way. They didn't like to call people by their given names, but preferred rather to call them by their father's names. For

example, Maionides name was Moses, Musa in Arabic. But in Arabic he was never called Musa but Abu-Imran, ^{in the Bible} since Moses' father was Amram. Abu Issa therefore implies that the person's father was Issa

which happens to be Jesus. So ~~how~~ ^{how} come
 this Jewish boy ^{is going} around calling himself
 "son of Jesus." ^{It} gets even more curious
 when we read what another Muslim
 author, ^{Ibn Haym}, says about his name - that
 is that Abu Issa's full name was
 Mohammed son of Jesus. Ibn Haym goes
 on to say that Abu Issa's followers
 acknowledged that both Jesus and Mohammed
 had ^{been} sent by God but that Abu Issa
 was ^{God's} final messenger.

This is so strange a notion that
 we have to understand what it is that
 we are dealing with. The best way is
 to read you a passage from the Mishneh
 Torah, the Halakhi Code of Maimonides
 with whom you would not be able to
 compare Abu Issa in so many other ways.

This is what Mamouides has to say about Jesus and Muhammad in a passage which was excised by Xian censors. [Tweedy p. 226]

I am not saying here that Abu Issa believed in this regard ^{exactly} what Mamouides wrote, ~~but~~ We don't know enough to say for sure. ~~besides which all we~~ ~~we do know~~ ~~that~~ have to go on comes from hostile observers who were bent on making the sect look as ridiculous as possible.

Abu-Issa had a disciple known as Tudah or Yudghan who also called himself a prophet, though his followers went one step further and proclaimed ~~himself~~ the messiah. One source records that, like his master, Abu Issa, Yudghan did not die but is expected to return and lead his people. The story does not end

here, though, for Yudya also had a disciple, Mushan (Moshe) who, according to the account of Shaharastani led an army of 19 men against the armies of the Khalif and was killed near the Iranian holy city of Kuma.

Now all of these exploits of messianic activism - by Abu-Issa, Yudya and Mushan - left an impression on the Jew ^{TW} 458-9 Mamonides, centuries later, records what he had heard in his Epistle to Yemen: [Twersky 458-9]

The message, for Mamonides and the Jewish communal leadership was crystal clear. Let no one attempt to change the order of things by actually attempting some positive action to bring about the messiah - nothing but disaster for the Jewish

community could ever come out of it.

That is, of course, the established policy of Diaspora Jewish communities throughout the ages. It is eminently understandable given the frequently precarious position of Jewish communities in the Diaspora. What we must try to understand, however,

is the other side — the messianic personality. ^{And that is much more difficult for us.}

What drives an Akh Issa to proclaim himself the prophet who is to usher in the messianic age? What causes a messiah to go into battle against the might of the Arab empire with 19 followers? What ^{is behind} ~~drives~~ the messianic personality?

The answer to this question is ^{from the answer to the first one} more complicated. It has to do, first of all, with the notion that was prominent in Jewish messianic thought from the second century on that there were to be not one but ~~of~~ two messiahs for Israel:

Messiah son of Joseph would appear first and die in the climactic battle against the nations of the world in Jerusalem.

This final war would trigger a series of disasters for the Jews from which they would be rescued by Messiah son of David who would redeem Israel and, as the first of his acts, would name Messiah ben Joseph. It is possible that

these men - Abu Issa and his spiritual descendants, felt themselves ~~to~~ ^{would} be the Messiah who ~~fight~~ and died in the knowledge that the true redemption would occur ~~in~~ shortly. Maybe so, maybe not.

There is, however, one conclusion that we can draw without hesitation.

~~Those~~ people, like Abu-Issa did not worry about the fact that ~~their~~ ^{their} forces were

no match for the armies of the Khalif. They felt that there was the ^{task} of initiating the messianic process ^{that they could do} ^{this process}. Once begun, would force God to intervene and the messianic scenario foreseen in Bible and ~~Talmud~~ Midrash would begin. Only in this way can this action make sense.

Next week I will discuss another messianic personality from another century. His name was Solomon Molcho and his messianic message was preached at another critical juncture in Jewish

history - the generation of the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. We know considerably more about him than we do about Abu-Issa and his story will help us still further in our attempt to understand the messianic personality?